

8 Names of God: Inspiring Divine Explorations with Students

Imagine a portal to open students' eyes to deeper layers of meaning and new ways of thinking about God. Names and descriptions of God abound in Tanakh and many more were added in Rabbinic writings. God cannot be captured by a single word, but our experience with sacred texts shines a light on the many different paths for our relationship with the Divine.

For an in-depth text-based version visit www.Jewishchallenge.org/names-of-god

Y-H-V-H י-ה-ו-ה

Y-H-V-H reflects a deep, boundaryless love we each can experience with the Divine. Stemming from the root H.Y.H., meaning “to be,” this name reflects the totality of reality and existence. We exist as extensions of God through our souls.

E-I א-ל

The name E-I means a being of power and authority. When used alone, E-I evokes the Deity with dominion over all in Creation and the muscle to enforce God’s will in obvious ways. When God is referred to as E-I Rachum V’Chanun, a God of compassion and graciousness, it means the true show of Divine power is kindness and empathy, not petty control and destruction.

E-lohim א-להים

While the name E-lohim sometimes denotes a separation of “otherness” to the point of judgment, it typically depicts the Creator as a robust force inventing the world for people’s benefit. This name also reflects clear boundaries between each individual and a divine Other in terms of shared respect and admiration.

E-I Sha-dai א-ל ש-ד-י

God appears to Avram (before his name change) as E-I Sha-dai (Shin-Dalet-Yod). The combination of these names is the self-reliant E-I (God) that conquers all of Creation in favor of those who cling to God. That elucidates why in Shmot 6:3 God explains that the forefathers only knew God as E-I Sha-dai—for those who cleave to God—and not Y-H-V-H.

E-heyeh Asher E-heyeh א-היה אשר א-היה

This name denotes the ultimate form of hope and optimism for the future. We see this when Moshe asks in Shmot 3:13 “when Bnai Yisrael ask me who sent me, what shall I respond?” God says “E-heyeh Asher E-heyeh/I will be what I will be.” E-heyeh derives from the root Hey-Yod-Hey meaning “to exist.”

Tziva-ot צב-אות

The name Tziva-ot means “armies” and conjures a picture of God ruling a vast collection of soldiers as the Commander and Strategist. The name connects to God’s partner, Bnai Yisrael, as they began after Mount Sinai a journey to serve as a Mamlechet Kohanim (a nation of priests), bringing the rest of the world closer to God. This is why the name Tziva-ot is first used when Chanah prays at the Mishkan/Tabernacle in Shiloh to pray to bear a child (Shmuel), who ultimately would establish the Kingship in Israel, a nation of priests.

Y-H-V-H/ E-lohim י-ה-ו-ה א-להים

The use of these two names together articulates a synergy of opposing ideas into a powerful, complete source. When written sequentially, Y-H-V-H and E-lohim represent the unity of closeness and otherness. Creating a deep connection with the Divine closes the gap between the hierarchical position of E-lohim and individuals being an extension of Y-H-V-H.

Shalom שלום

This name of God stems from the root Shin-Lamed-Mem meaning “complete and peaceful.” The Talmud declares this a name of God and therefore one may not greet another with this word in the bathhouse for fear of disparaging the name. Based on the story of Gideon (Shoftim 6:23-24), Shalom—peace and wholeness—is the name of God for those who feel broken, alone, and disconcerted.

Let's inspire students' relationship with God so they can create enduring meaning from Jewish values, literacy, practice, and belief to sustain the Jewish people. Reach out to JEIC Founding Director Rabbi Shmuel Feld at RabbiFeld@JewishChallenge.org.